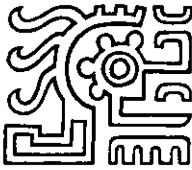
Contents

	List of Illustrations	viii
	Preface to the Revised Edition	ix
	Preface to the First Edition	xiii
	Acknowledgments	xvii
	Introduction: Mosaics and Centers	1
1	The Sources: From Storybook to Encyclopedia	11
2	Quetzalcoatl and the Foundation of Tollan	63
3	Other Tollans	104
4	The Return of Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire	148
5	When Strangers Come to Town: The Return of Queztalcoatl and Millennial Discourse	205
	Notes	241
	Selected Bibliography	265
	Index	275

Introduction: Mosaics and Centers

The Aztec Empire was a mosaic of cities.

—Jacques Soustelle
Daily Life of the Aztecs



The story of ancient Mexico is the story of places and symbols of places. The little footprints crossing and looping the ancient maps suggest that archaic Mexicans visited such places as Teotihuacán, "Abode of the Gods," Tollan, "Place of Reeds," Xochicalco, "Place of the House of Flowers," Colhuacán, "Place of the Ancestors," and Teocolhuacán, "Place of the Divine Ancestors." In a sense, ancient Mexican history is the story of people and their symbols moving from place to place.

This volume is concerned with a network of places in pre-Hispanic Mexico that conform dramatically to that social order known as the traditional city[1] and with the role one complex symbolic form, Quetzalcoatl, "Plumed Serpent," played in the organization, legitimation, and subversion of a large segment of the urban tradition. It seeks to present a new understanding of Quetzalcoatl's significance by emphasizing the urban setting of the ancient culture and the ways in which ancient Mexicans regarded their society as a cosmo-magical construct. It strives to do this by focusing on the meaning of Quetzalcoatl's relationship to the great Toltec capital of Tollan, which appears in the primary sources as both a historical capital and a fabulous symbol of a mythical city.

Contemporary scholars are aware of the urban character of ancient Mexico, but an old and stubborn Europocentric approach to the New World has deflected scholarship away from a sustained awareness

that the ancient Mexican city-state was the center of life and that this has great significance for the meaning of religious symbols, including the plumed serpent. Working from a comparative analysis of pristine urbanism, Paul Wheatley, an urban geographer, has summarized the significance cities have for an understanding of the ancient world: "It is the city which has been, and to a large extent still is, the style center in the traditional world, disseminating social, political, technical, religious and aesthetic values and functioning as an organizing principle, conditioning the manner and quality of life in the countryside."[2]

One outstanding characteristic in the history of pre-Columbian cities is the eccentric periodicity of settlement and stability. The urban tradition had an erratic pattern, "marked by political fragmentation, discontinuity in occupation and decline in the crafts between the successive periods of intensified integrations."[3] This pattern of discontinuity was accompanied by the persistence of several religious symbols, among them the feathered serpent, which appeared in a number of regional capitals over a long period of time. It is impressive that Quetzalcoatl, acting in the written sources as a creator god, the morning star, the wind god, a culture hero, the emblem of the priesthood, is inlaid not only within the mosaic of cities constituting the Aztec empire, but also within the obscurer mosaic of cities dominating the long history that led up to the empire. The present study attempts to elucidate the manner in which the symbol of Quetzalcoatl contributed to the organization of six capitals—Teotihuacán, Chalollan, Tula, Xochicalco, Chichén Itzá, and Tenochtitlán—by symbolizing the legitimation of power and authority in a trembling world. The overall significance of this pattern is that Quetzalcoatl can be understood, along with his myriad other meanings, as the patron of capital cities in a significant part of Mesoamerica. Quetzalcoatl was a symbol of authority, not only in terms of his expression in specific circumstances, but in terms of the origin and sanctification of authority in capital cities.

Quetzalcoatl and the city of Tollan present one of the most complex puzzles for the historian of religions to work with. For years scholars have spoken of the Quetzalcoatl "problem" or the Toltec "problem." Some years ago, Henry B. Nicholson, one of the leading experts in Mesoamerican religions, wrote a work entitled "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory." There and elsewhere Nicholson has shown that the "tangle and complexity" of the deity Quetzalcoatl is heightened by "his inextricable interdigitation with the life and personality of a figure whose fundamental historicity seems likely but who can be discerned only through a dense screen of mythical, legendary, and folkloristic accretions: Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl."[4] In my view, we can untangle some of

the complex and frustrating lines of meaning by seeing Quetzalcoatl, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, and Tollan as combined to form one of the major competing traditions in the sanctification of supreme authority which resided in major ceremonial centers and capital cities in Mesoamerica. While it is clear that Quetzalcoatl was not the only symbol of sanctified authority in central Mesoamerica, he was a distinctly valued, resilient, and indispensable paradigm of authority. Although the meaning of the Quetzalcoatl tradition changed in content over time—it received marvelous and startling elaborations in different cities—it maintained its importance as a symbol of sanctified authority from Teotihuacán's empire (A.D. 250) to the very end of the Aztec empire (A.D. 1521). This book attempts to interpret the history of this religious tradition.

This is a hermeneutical task. It is an attempt to understand the meanings of a variety of texts (painted, sculptured, written) that carried apparent and hidden messages concerning the nature and character of authority in Mesoamerican cities. My approach depends on the use of the discipline and categories of the history of religions, especially the renewed concern for relating the religious texts of a people to the social and historical contexts in which they were read, danced, applied, and reinterpreted. In attempting to comprehend the enigmatic figure of Quetzalcoatl and his importance as a dynastic paradigm, I will draw upon the inspirational and insightful writings of Mircea Eliade, Charles Long, and Jonathan Z. Smith, whose contributions toward a method of deciphering the meaning of myth, symbol, and religion in traditional cultures have set the stage for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Mesoamerican religion. Special use will be made of the categories of sacred space and the sacred human because they enable us to understand the currents of thought and action that organized and animated life in the pre-Columbian city. Advantage will be gained by bringing the "Great Tradition" of the Toltecs and their capital city, Tollan, into dynamic interplay with the notions of the symbolism of the center, sacred genealogies, cosmogonic models, and hierocosmic symbols. "Great Tradition" refers to the canonical traditions about the Toltec civilization that contained paradigms for spatial order, kingship, sanctity, priesthood, and major institutions of the city. The longer I read Mesoamerican texts, the more I am convinced that a significant advance in understanding can be accomplished through the sensitive and sustained use of history of religions' categories and methods.

This hermeneutical effort will also benefit from a recent reinterpretation of the theory of the central place by the urban geographer Paul Wheatley, which is articulated in *The Pivot of the Four Quarters.* There and elsewhere, Wheatley has combined the methods of urban

studies with the insights from the history of religions and tested them against a multitude of sources from seven areas of primary urban generation to show that ceremonial centers were the "primary instruments for the creation of political, social, economic and sacred space," that constituted traditional cities and their spheres of influence.[5] Developing the insights articulated by Fustel de Coulanges a hundred years before ("We have seen how the religion of the city is mixed up with everything"),[6] Wheatley has demonstrated some of the complex ways in which religious symbols and meanings contributed to the origin and development of cities. In Mesoamerica, it is becoming clear that the symbol of Quetzalcoatl integrated and was used to integrate the multitude of social processes that constituted the urban tradition. Though it is obvious that the cities under Quetzalcoatl's patronage were complex worlds of economic trade, hydraulic systems, and military expansion, it has been less obvious how the symbolic structures managed and interpreted by elites in the ceremonial centers directed these processes.

Quetzalcoatl and Tollan were religious symbols in the sense that they revealed and were utilized to demonstrate sacred modes of being in pre-Columbian society. Their sacrality derived from their capacity to participate in powers that transcended the pragmatic realms of textures, spaces, and beings, or what Mircea Eliade calls celestial archetypes.[7] Put simply, Tollan was a symbol of sacred space and Quetzalcoatl was a symbol of sacred authority. These symbols were models for two types of orientation in Mesoamerican culture; orientation in space and orientation in the social hierarchy. Tollan expressed and gave sacred prestige to the effective organization of space associated with ceremonial cities while Quetzalcoatl was the standard for the vital relationship between kingship and divinity. Religious symbols, however, are never simple expressions, but always multivalent and complex. They have the capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings that have hidden but vital correspondences. Within the history of Mesoamerican urbanism, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl imbued kings, merchants, artists, and priests with sacrality and celestial power. Also, there were many Tollans—cities that symbolized in different ways the interaction between terrestrial space and celestial design. These two symbols revealed a vision of the cosmos that depended on the intimacy of city, kingship, and the gods, a vision that helped a number of cultures and capitals achieve stability and legitimacy in a changing world.

But there is also an irony in this vision which derives in part from the nature of religious symbols and in part from the Mesoamerican conception of authority, for, as Eliade notes, religious symbols can express contradictory aspects of ultimate reality, combining them in

a coincidence of opposites. The tradition of Quetzalcoatl in Tollan reveals that at critical moments in the urban process, when kingship and city had achieved a marvelous stability, there appeared a contradiction of this stability from within the tradition itself. Mesoamerican empires, which are founded on an obsession for order, place, stability, and continuity, were based on a paradigm that had an "other" dimension and destiny. The symbols of Quetzalcoatl and Tollan contained the promise of disjunction, collapse, and abdication of order and authority. This study of the Mesoamerican urban tradition will attempt to show both the imperial security of Quetzalcoatl's symbol and the ironic subversion embedded in the myths and prophecies about Quetzalcoatl. When the Aztec elites utilized the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl's return to interpret the arrival of Spaniards in their kingdom, the Aztecs contributed to the reversal of their efforts to control their destiny. It is the combination of the Aztec dependence on the Toltec tradition for legitimacy and their application of the myth of Quetzalcoatl's return which constitutes the irony of empire.

This relationship between sacred symbol and social process is reflected in the fact that at least six important Mesoamerican cities, Teotihuacán, Tula, Xochicalco, Cholollan, Chichén Itzá, and Tenochtitlán, were organized around shrines that carried the image of Quetzalcoatl and integrated the social complexities of regional kingdoms, city-states, or empires. These centers were places where the sacred, as it was conceived in Mesoamerica, had manifested itself in elementary hierophanies (through caves, springs, mountains, rocks, animals) or in more evolved hierophanies (manifestations of specific deities to priestly elites) and so were considered the quintessential meeting places of the supernatural and natural realms. The temples and pyramid temples marking these "world axes" received their sanctity and authority, in part, from the traditions of meanings associated with Quetzalcoatl.

This study does not seek merely to confirm the efficacy of history of religions' categories in the study of Mesoamerican religions. Its aim is to sketch out the lines of force that related the central shrines associated with Quetzalcoatl to the social and historical processes that animated the cities in question. From studying the history of Mesoamerican urbanism and the complex changes that influenced the long tradition of legitimacy and authority, I have become convinced that some categories, for example, the symbolism of the center, need to be enlarged upon in order to reach a fuller understanding of Quetzalcoatl and the city in Mesoamerica. More attention must be given to the centrifugal functions and influences of sacred centers and sacred cities. Great centers like Tenochtitlán, Chichén Itzá, and Tula did not just integrate, attract, and consolidate peoples and process; they also

extended, pushed, and broke the boundaries of their cosmos. Capital cities with their ceremonial centers were involved in rebellions, subversive movements, competing traditions, conquests, and military defeats. The centrifugal tendencies of Tenochtitlán, for instance, weakened the power we usually attribute to the symbolism of the center. The recent excavations at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City suggest that the Aztec "Center of the World" not only integrated the periphery, but also was manipulated by peripheral kingdoms to magnify its ideological and ritual system to the point of near self-destruction. In short, more focus needs to be placed on the periphery and the role of the periphery in the expression of Mesoamerican religion. In this study I attempt to expand the notion of a creative hermeneutic by utilizing the shape and character of ancient Mexican history to expand concepts like symbolism of the center and the *axis mundi* by noting the interplay between centers and peripheries and their social and symbolic consequences.

One major difficulty facing the historian of religions interpreting this pattern is the difficulty of "establishing the text." This arises from the fragmentary nature of the mute and written primary sources, the colonial nature of most of the written works, and the amazing variety of feathered serpents found in these texts. Recently, scholars such as Jacques Soustelle and Robert McC. Adams have argued that the primary sources are adequate, yielding in their archaeological sequence a detailed picture of Aztec life just prior to the conquest. But this optimistic view minimizes and obscures the rupture in transmission of indigenous traditions caused not only by pre-Columbian upheavals, but also by the conquest of Mexico and the colonial pressures of the sixteenth century. It is common for scholars working in this area to skim over the significant hermeneutical adjustments made by Spanish and Indian writers influenced by colonial politics, personal needs, mendicant theology and goals, and language differences. Alfredo López Austin refers to our predicament when he notes, "the indigenous sources . . . appear to have been elaborated with malevolent delight in the prospect of confusing future historians."[8] In a number of cases (Sahagún's celebrated *Florentine Codex* is one), what we call primary sources are elaborate Spanish glosses of original sources now lost. This hazardous situation invites an exegesis not only of the content concerning Quetzalcoatl but of the sources themselves.

The scholar or layman who enters upon these archives is not in the same position as one who studies the texts of most other religious traditions, like Christian, Judaic, Buddhist, or Hindu, or even one who does field work among contemporary native peoples. Between us and the pre-Columbian city and its symbols stand not just time and wear, distance and cultural diversity, and renewal within a tra-

dition of wisdom, but also the conquest of Mexico and the invention of the American Indian. Before building my own interpretation of Quetzalcoatl and the ancient city, I will begin to define the "text" by discussing the transformation in primary texts that will serve as the basis for my interpretation. I call this transformation "from storybook to encyclopedia." It is outlined in chapter 1, where I identify the history, nature, and reliability of those sources carrying significant versions of the Quetzalcoatl tradition. I also review the ways in which scholars encountering this fragmented situation and the enigmatic Quetzalcoatl have attempted to design and redesign the symbol's significance according to their theories of culture, religion, civilization, and Indians.

The unusual nature of the evidence demands a skillful interweaving of material from both archaeological and written sources. In some instances it is not simply a matter of weaving, but also of tentative reconstruction, projection, and just plain guessing. For example, two of the six capitals we are examining are known almost exclusively through archaeological work. This presents the historian of religions seeking to understand social and symbolic changes with serious methodological problems. One distinguished scholar has described the limits of archaeological evidence:

> Emphasis is given to objects and institutions evoking consensual patterns of behavior, art styles, cult objects, rituals, rather than to those which might suggest incipient patterns of differentiation and stratification. . . . Art tends to deal mainly with traditionalized symbolic themes which probably always were most resistant to change.[9]

The static messages of ruins, monuments, and inscriptions demand a delicate caution in deciphering the meaning, enrichments, and alterations in a symbolic complex over time. But if we look at the evidence through a different lens, the limits of the evidence can work to our advantage. While it is apparent that archaeological data does not yield pictures of changes "taking place," it does provide statements about continuities and discontinuities in traditions that have "taken place." The possibilities of such a view are enhanced by the exciting advances made in recent decades, up to the present, by scientists working in the archaeological zones that dot Mexico's landscape. This is especially true regarding the discoveries at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. As a recent conference of Mesoamerican specialists has shown, a new reconstruction of Tenochtitlán's history is possible through the examination of chronicles and archaeological evidence concerning the Templo Mayor.[10]

A second problem presented by working with archaeological sources is locating a fruitful starting place. The historian of religions must wade into the pools of evidence at the safest starting point. In terms of the Mesoamerican iconography of the city and the feathered serpent, the safest entry point is the Post-Classic iconographic tradition, which is accompanied by abundant if hazardous documentation. We must work backward from the known Aztec and Toltec periods to the unknown or partially known Classic and pre-Classic periods with sensitivity and skill. I am not, however, suggesting a thoughtless use of analogy and comparison to drive the understood messages of one time period back into the obscurer puzzles of another. I am saying that, after analyzing the sacred temple tradition in Mesoamerica's many Tollans, it is possible to trace the modes of symbolic, stylistic, and architectural connections between relevant data and, with the "eyes of critical restraint and disciplined imagination,"[11] to identify authentic continuities and changes in the iconographic tradition back to Teotihuacán and its contemporaries.

My approach is based on the observation of the coincidence of two images in Mesoamerican urbanism, the original image of Tollan in the written sources and the sculptured, painted, and written images of Quetzalcoatl. In his fullest and most enigmatic manifestations, the plumed serpent appears within, at the center of, or related to the image of Tollan and its urban replications. While the two images have been discussed in relation to one another before, more advantage can be gained by focusing on the significance of Tollan as a city symbolizing the magnificent achievement of an elaborate level of social integration, creativity, and influence, and by utilizing this significance as a context in which to interpret Quetzalcoatl as patron of the urban structure as a living and vital form in ancient Mexico. The point is not merely that Quetzalcoatl was the symbol of authority in a number of cities in Central Mexico, but that Quetzalcoatl was the symbol of the authority of the urban form and structure itself. Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the paradigmatic meaning of this conjunction of Quetzalcoatl and Tollan utilizing evidence associated with the ceremonial city of Tula Xicocotitlan. This chapter also includes a discussion and interpretation of Quetzalcoatl's role in Mesoamerican cosmology. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the symbol of Quetzalcoatl functioned in "other Tollans," a series of regional capitals that renewed the Toltec tradition by serving as the social and cultural pivots on which the culture of the time stood and from which came the social and symbolic powers that dominated the society. A series of short histories is presented to show the variety of Quetzalcoatls manifest in the urban traditions and the ways in which the general orientation of Quetzal-

coatl and city persisted and was altered by social changes, and yet continued to sanction and justify those changes.

This study will also reveal how Quetzalcoatl finally became an ironic symbol of urban authority. For not only did he function to guide, inspire, and stabilize the Aztec elites of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Mexico, but with the detail of the prophesied return of the ancient priest-king, he worked to undermine the structure of sovereignty in Aztec Mexico. Chapter 4 shows how the ideal image of Quetzalcoatl in Tollan functioned as a subversive genealogy, a critique against the royal line that ordered the capital of an empire, in the face of the sixteenth-century crisis that threatened Tenochtitlán. Our discussion utilizes the notions of center and periphery as interpretive devices to help us understand the meaning of the evidence uncovered at the Templo Mayor, the great Aztec shrine of this last Tollan of pre-Columbian history. Through our focus on the mythic drama of the return of Quetzalcoatl and his identification with Cortes, we will see how the Toltec paradigms related to and overpowered the other deities and ancestral heroes in the last days of the Aztec kingdom. Quetzalcoatl and Tollan maintained their prestige as the preeminent symbols of place and the authority of place. In this way, we can come to understand how the myths and prophecies of Quetzalcoatl reflected the irony of the last Mesoamerican empire.